

Doomsday Distraction

Many Christians spend all their energy watching the clouds for Jesus' return—

yet Jesus told us to keep our focus on the Great Commission

Let's be clear about something from the get-go: I don't know when the world is going to end, and neither do you. Your pastor doesn't know, and your Bible-study leader doesn't know, either. The pope has no idea, and not one radio talk-show host, televangelist or prophet I can think of has the inside scoop.

Not only are all of us in the dark, but so are those who have gone before us. To my knowledge, no one has yet found the ancient guru who can reveal this mystery from the grave.

Yet all my Christian life I've read books and heard sermons confidently proclaiming the significance of certain world events as end-time indicators, only to be disappointed with the passage of time when it becomes obvious that the mark was missed once again. What is the problem?

It seems that although the Bible clearly communicates the primary messages God wants us to understand, our generation has been inordinately fixated on finding some mysterious code embedded in Scripture that would make us the pinnacle of human history. But it's time to accept the possibility that perhaps the most obvious and clearly articulated messages of Scripture are indeed of primary importance, and the secret formulas pointing to our being the "last generation" are hidden for a reason: They do not reveal the truth and are a distraction for many in the body of Christ.

We don't know when the world is going to end because God does not want us to know. Jesus told His disciples this very clearly before He ascended to heaven to be with the Father.

When He was giving them final instructions after His resurrection, they asked Him, "'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (Acts 1:6, NKJV).

That was their version of the question, "Is the world about to end?" They believed that deliverance from Roman occupation meant the fulfillment of God's promises of peace and security, which would make them the final generation. They were wrong, and we might be too.

Jesus responded, "'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority'" (Acts 1:7, NIV). Another time He said, "'No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father'" (Matt. 24:36). It was not for the disciples to know, and it is not for us to know, either.

Discerning the Times

Despite Jesus' remarks, we continue to be preoccupied with questions about the end of the world. Our interest is understandable: We love our Lord and Savior and can't wait for Him to come back.

Besides, earth can be uncomfortable, and we all know heaven will be absolutely wonderful—everything will be just right. Big Macs won't make us fat. No one will be poor. There will be no war.

Why wouldn't we want to get there as soon as possible?

But too often our desire to see Jesus return culminates in false expectations and predictions. During the Jesus Movement of the 1970s, everyone was excited about The Late Great Planet Earth and its prediction of the imminent return of Jesus. There were also movies such as A Thief in the Night and songs such as "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" that made us believe, in the light of current events and Bible prophecy, that the second coming was imminent.

Jesus faced the same problem in His day. He told the people: "'When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?'" (Luke 12:54-56).

Obviously, many of our leaders are having a difficult time interpreting "this present time" for us. And oddly enough, even though they miss it year after year, we continue to call them experts in biblical prophecy, buying updated versions of their books and foolishly attending their seminars.

Regrettably, too many believers who should have been focused on strengthening local churches, praying for and financing the expansion of God's kingdom, or attending school so they could become leaders in their field of interest made choices that altered the course of their lives based on a misunderstanding of where they are on the timeline of human history.

For example, some friends of mine married girls they otherwise

wouldn't have married just because they wanted wives for a while before Jesus returned. Others avoided college and career opportunities because they felt they had only a short time to devote themselves to winning the lost.

Many purchased obscure farms, ranches and retreat facilities rather than investing in their local churches, thinking that the economy would collapse and the Antichrist would be ruling the world within days. Now too many of these misled Christians are unemployable because they didn't receive an education or build a business, and as a result their lives have minimum impact—all because they misunderstood the times.

Unfortunately, many of the people who placed their hopes in Jesus' imminent return 30 years ago are discouraged now. Some of my old friends are no longer committed to God. They feel they were deceived by Christian leaders who used fear tactics to sell books and movies, or they are disillusioned after having tried to convince everyone around them to make quick decisions for Christ.

Most of the Christian leaders at that time were good men and women who wanted people to give their lives to the gospel. They didn't encourage anyone to make rash decisions. They wanted people to be devoted to God and motivated to do His work until His return.

The same is true today. Even if your pastor speaks about the end times frequently, he is not suggesting that you sell your home and move to a cabin in the woods to wait for the rapture. If he is, you may need to find a new pastor.

When Jesus spoke about the end times, He made it clear that

our focus should be not on when the end will come, but on what we need to do before it happens. When He talked about the signs that would indicate the end, He said, “‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come'” (Matt. 24:14, NKJV).

Jesus said that wars, famines and earthquakes would be the beginning of the birth pangs and that we would see false prophets and apostasy. He also strongly encouraged us to stand firm as we face the traumatic conditions He predicted. Why? Because the full fruit of the labor won't come until everyone has had an opportunity to hear the gospel!

Developing a Right Focus

Could it be that with our fixation on Israel, we've neglected the Scriptures that indicate the Second Coming is predicated on our spreading the gospel throughout the world? The expansion of the kingdom of God might be our best predictor of when the end will come—and right now there are several billion people on the planet who still have not heard the gospel.

What this means is that supporting the planting and development of life-giving local churches might do more for the Second Coming than attending a prophecy seminar. Making long-term lifestyle choices that place strong believers in positions of influence might be more helpful than short-term fixes. Constant, steady integrity might be more important than stocking your basement with dried food and canned goods.

Don't get me wrong: Israel is very important, and the return of the Jewish people to Palestine is a sign; but it's not the

only sign people are pointing at to support their end-times claims.

Some point to the United Nations and say it is proof that the end is near—because a one-world government is necessary for the work of the Antichrist. Certainly a one-world government could come about through the United Nations under certain circumstances, but we are nowhere near that state now.

The United Nations is impotent without the United States' military and economic resources. And even if a one-world government is eventually established, there is no reason to believe that an evil ruler will immediately rise up to control the world.

Others have brought up the natural disasters that have occurred around the world. Aren't those signs of the end? They are, but only as part of the early birth pangs.

What about the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem? We hear about it all the time, and people think it means the end has come. But there are no credible indicators that even a serious discussion about building a temple on the Mount in Jerusalem, let alone construction itself, is about to take place.

People have also vigorously proclaimed that they know Jesus is coming back after a "great falling away" has occurred. They point to the modern rise in cults and secularism and say this means Jesus' return is just around the corner.

But it's not true. We are, in fact, enjoying the growth of Bible-preaching churches and ministries throughout the world and the decline of liberal, non-believing churches. The body

of Christ is growing more rapidly right now than at any other time in Christian history.

In fact, our best missiologists declare that we are enjoying the most rapid expansion of the gospel in the history of the world right now. We are not seeing a falling away; rather, we are witnessing explosive growth. The recent numbers compiled by the editors of the World Christian Encyclopedia (WCE) make it clear that we are in the midst of the opposite of a great falling away. We are living in the middle of a great ingathering.

According to the WCE, Christianity has fluctuated a great deal since the time of Jesus. For the first 19 centuries, it grew by leaps and bounds. By the year 500, 22 percent of the world's population were believers.

But by 1500, Christian growth was not keeping up with global population growth, and the percentage shrank to 19. Then, by the beginning of the last century, one-third of the world was considered Christian, and at least half the world was aware of the gospel and had been influenced by it.

Great Christian evangelists of the late 19th century, such as D.L. Moody, did their work so well that they began to expect that the Great Commission might be completed during their lifetimes. Many of the leading missionaries at the time rallied together to try to spread the gospel to every person.

But the 20th century presented new challenges to the gospel. Communism and increased secularism dealt major blows to Christian ministry for decades, though powerful pockets of Christianity grew even within the darkest areas.

Then the last three decades saw rapid growth again, and today we continue to experience Christian expansion all over the world, particularly in the Southern Hemisphere. The United States and Europe are lagging behind, but strong churches throughout the Western world are making major strides.

The world is not becoming more secular, as many feared. It is becoming more Christian.

The WCE says that every 24 hours, the following things occur:

- 69,000 people become Christians
- 122,000 new Christians are baptized
- 30,000 Christians become Pentecostal by baptism in the Holy Spirit
- 500 worship centers are planted
- 500 million hours are given to evangelism
- 206,000 people are evangelized
- 9,900 fewer people remain unevangelized
- 165,000 full-length Bibles—and more than 11 million selections of Scripture—are distributed
- \$740 million is given to Christian causes

The worldwide church's income increases by \$296 million.

So, where are we in the end times? We are in Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." Right now, God is building the greatest churches in the history of the world.

Our churches aren't falling away. They are becoming more glued to God's principles, to the teaching of His Word and to the

life of His Spirit. Churches worldwide are proclaiming the promise of God that people can be born again. They are conducting major strategic outreaches, ministering to the sick and needy and helping people to be delivered from their sins. Our churches are doing great work, and I am thrilled to be alive at this time to see it.

What We Can Do

I think the facts tell us that this is the generation of opportunity for the expansion of the gospel, not the generation of demise. We are expanding the kingdom of God as never before, and His gospel is spreading across the earth. But when we live entirely within Christian circles, it can feel as if Christianity is much more expansive than it actually is.

We have much to do. Christianity is the largest religion in the world by far, with 2 billion adherents, but there are still billions of people who need to hear about Jesus. Islam is actually growing in numbers, and the Mormons and other groups continue to successfully evangelize. New non-Christian cults form every day.

Each day, 340,500 people are born, and all of them need a chance to hear the gospel. God is in no hurry because He loves people so much and wants them to have a chance to know Him. "He is patient with you," Peter wrote, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9, NIV).

If we want to be a part of fulfilling the Great Commission and helping people "come to repentance," here's what we need to do:

Live as if He were coming back today, but plan as if we were going to live a long, full life.

Participate in a healthy, life-giving local church. Everywhere in the world where the gospel has made a measurable impact on a culture, it has happened through church planting.

Finance global evangelization. Do all you can to ensure that your local church is heavily involved with missions and is preparing the young people of the church for positions of influence for their generation.

Our generation is called to make great leaps in the spread of the gospel. This is what the Lord is doing, and if we will use our resources and not become distracted with false hopes of a premature Second Coming, we will realize God's calling for us. We will expand His kingdom so that when He does come, the celebration can be bigger and greater than we had ever dreamed.

Ted Haggard is pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and the newly appointed president of the National Association of Evangelicals.